

Senate Education Listen and Learn Meeting – June 6, 2011

Senator Brian Schoenjahn – Opening Statement

Budgeting is about priorities. My priorities are improving and expanding educational opportunity for Iowans at all levels.

After all, the best way to strengthen our economy is to prepare Iowans to compete successfully in the global economy. And it is why I've asked Iowans familiar with key areas of Iowa education to speak to us today.

Iowa is in a strong financial position. The Senate has passed a responsible and balanced budget which has a projected \$400 million surplus, \$600 million in reserves and the state has an AAA credit rating. There is no budget crisis to excuse the deep Republican cuts education at all levels.

The largest differences between House Republicans and Senate Democrats are in education. Generally, Democrats support funding at last year's level or support a modest increase. Republicans insist on deep cuts.

Take community colleges. Under Republican control of the Legislature, Iowa's community college tuition rates rose to be the highest in the nation. Today enrollment is at record levels as Iowans work hard to improve their skills.

Democrats want to help Iowans help themselves by increasing general aid to community colleges by \$10 million over last year's budget, and providing an addition \$10 million for a new worker training program to help unemployed and underemployed workers fill existing openings for skilled workers.

House Republicans, by way of contrast, cut \$14 million from last year's allocation for community colleges.

Enrollment at all three universities is up. With additional students come additional costs. Our public universities are working to keep tuition increases as low as possible.

Despite this, House Republicans cut funding for Iowa's public universities by \$40 million. The Senate proposed steady funding at last year's level.

During the last four years, Iowa's quality preschool effort for four-year-olds has earned strong support from parents, educators, and community leaders. After first voting to eliminate it, House Republicans now seek to sabotage it by cutting funding in half.

Democrats approved a two percent increase in basic state aid to local schools. Over the 40 year history of the school aid formula, this is a below-average increase.

The Republican demand for no increase at all is unprecedented. During the farm crisis, Governor Branstad never singled out local students and schools for such negative treatment. Today, with a much stronger state budget, there is even less reason to punish our local schools and their communities like this.

Responsible budgeting means understanding how state actions affect real people. Take Maintenance of Effort (MOE) issues. The House Republican budget risks losing \$12 million in federal help for Iowans in need of vocational rehabilitation in order to "save" \$26,000 in state funds. That just doesn't make sense.

Today I invited Iowans with direct experience with how education budget decisions can help or hurt Iowa families. I thank everyone for their participation, and I hope the light shed today will help demonstrate what is at stake in the state budget negotiations.